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Improving psychological well-being and adjustment to enhance positive aging

Abstract

The elderly are the fastest growing population in the United States. With this increase in population comes the need for help in improving psychological well-being and enhance adjustment. This paper explores three factors that may benefit the adjustment process for the elderly population. These factors are religion, social support, and intergenerational programs. The need for mental health counselors in this field will continue to increase as the population continues to grow older. In combination with counseling and the three factors of religion, social support and intergenerational programs, adjustment for the elderly can be optimistic.

IMPROVING PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL – BEING AND ADJUSTMENT TO
ENHANCE POSITIVE AGING

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The elderly are the fastest growing population in the United States. With this increase in population comes the need for help in improving psychological well-being and enhancing adjustment. This paper explores three factors that may benefit the adjustment process for the elderly population. These factors are religion, social support, and intergenerational programs. The need for mental health counselors in this field will continue to increase as the population continues to grow older. In combination with counseling and the three factors of religion, social support and intergenerational programs, adjustment for the elderly can be optimistic.

Improving Psychological Well – Being and Adjustment to Enhance Positive Aging

What are society's perceptions of growing older? Are there feelings of fear? Is there a fear of being alone? Some feelings that are commonly associated with aging encompass helplessness, boredom, and loneliness. Having feelings such as these before an individual is even considered elderly can cause a significant amount of negative thoughts towards growing older and negative psychological adjustment as an individual ages. The elderly may experience feelings of loneliness and go through different physical ailments but there are factors to help reduce the negative effects of each. This paper will look at three factors that seem to have a positive effect on the aging process and may help improve the psychological well – being of the elderly. These factors include: religion, social support, and intergenerational interaction.

Religion and Aging

Religion is defined as “an organized system of beliefs, practices, rituals and symbols designed (a) to facilitate closeness to the sacred or transcendent (God, higher power, or ultimate truth/ reality), and (b) to foster an understanding of one's relation and responsibility to others in living together in a community”(Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2000, p.18). Having a belief in a

higher power or God may be a concept hard to understand but for certain individuals it may provide a sense of hope. This belief can bring a sense of worth that the world cannot provide and an appreciation for others that the world does not teach. Many individuals do not have answers to some difficult questions about life and its results, but believing that there is a being that can help carry those burdens may be a great sense of relief to some individuals.

Benefits of Religious Involvement

Religious involvement is associated with greater well – being and life satisfaction, greater purpose and meaning in life, greater hope and optimism, less anxiety and depression, more stable marriages and lower rates of substance abuse (Koenig, 2000). Depression is common within the elderly population.

Depression is associated with feelings of loneliness, despair, hopelessness, sadness and worthlessness. Koenig and colleagues (1995) found that religious coping may reduce the affective symptoms of depression, but appeared less effective for the biological symptoms that are probably more responsive to medical treatments. Depression can severely affect an individual's life. The level of religious commitment also predicts speed of recovery from depression regardless of initial depression severity, an effect that is strongest in those with chronic physical disability that is not responding to medical therapies (Koenig, George, & Peterson, 1998). Religious commitment not only affects individuals with depression but people with any kind of physical ailment. Several sources of

literature suggest that elderly people who are more deeply involved in religion tend to enjoy better physical health than older adults who are not as religious (Krause, Chatters, Meltzer, & Morgan, 2000).

Spirituality and Aging

Another important aspect of religion is spirituality. "Spirituality is the personal quest for understanding answers to ultimate questions about life, about meaning, and about relationship to the sacred or transcendent, which may (or may not) lead to or arise from the development of religious rituals and the formation of community" (Koenig, 2000, p.18). As individuals grow older they may search for meaning in their lives. The elderly are at a point in their lives when they want meaning to transcend from what they do here on earth to a higher level. If meaning comes from productivity and what is being contributed to the society the elderly would feel worthless. Finding meaning in something greater than productivity gives them the meaning and significance they are trying to find. Not only are they finding meaning and worth but they are also finding community. A new concept of spirituality constructed by Crowther, Parker, Achenbaum, Larimore, and Koenig brings in the idea of positive spirituality. "Positive spirituality involves a developing and internalized personal relation with the sacred or transcendent that is not bound by race, ethnicity, economics, or class and promotes the wellness and welfare of self and others" (2002, p.614).

The elderly experience many life-changing events as they age. They may lose loved ones to death and disease. They may experience physical ailments of their own that may change the amount of activity in which they can partake.

Positive spirituality may reduce the sense of loss of control and helplessness that accompanies illness (Crowther, 2002). Illness can change a person's concept of life itself when they lose complete control over their physical health. Positive spiritual beliefs provide a cognitive framework that reduces stress and increases purpose and meaning in the face of illness (Crowther, 2002).

Public religious behaviors that improve coping during times of physical illness include, but are not limited to, participating in worship services, praying with others (and having others pray for one's health), and visits from religious leaders such as a chaplain, pastor, priest, or rabbi at home or in the hospital (Crowther, 2002). Not only in the home and hospital, but visits in the nursing home and other facilities also help provide the elderly with support and comfort.

Prayer and Aging

Another aspect of positive spiritual belief is the practice and belief in prayer. Prayer as expressed by William James (1902), who maintained that prayer is "...the very soul and essence of religion"(p.365). Prayer is a major part in religion and spirituality. It is the connection between the individual and God. There is some evidence that elderly people are especially likely to pray. Research by Poloma and Gallup (1991), indicated that the proportion of elderly people who

pray (91%) is higher than in any other age group. The occurrence of being alone and isolated in later life is more prevalent because of loved ones dying and individuals losing certain physical capabilities. The elderly find themselves more isolated in nursing homes and other assisted living facilities. Spiritual activities like prayer and being prayed for may reduce the sense of isolation and increase the individual's sense of control over illness or disease (Crowther, 2002).

There is an association between spiritual and/or religious activities and the reduction in disability and disease, thus allowing seniors to remain actively engaged (Crowther, 2002). Remaining active in life helps the elderly maintain a healthy life. A healthy life can be enhanced by many different types of religious activities such as reading the Bible, going to church, and praying. A healthy life can also be enhanced by actual beliefs presented in certain religions. Religiously committed persons are less likely to engage in health behaviors like cigarette smoking and excessive alcohol use (Koenig, 2000).

Many individuals find that reading the Bible helps to keep their mind off problems they are encountering. Prayer is a way to reach out to God for help in easing the stress and pain of different burdens. There is little doubt that a major function of prayer is to help people cope effectively with stressful events (Krause, 2000).

Functions of Prayer

Prayer has many different functions. Prayer can be one on one with God. It can be one individual coming to God with concerns, praises and thanksgiving, and concern for a loved one. Prayer can be within a group, individuals' coming together to lift concerns and praises to God. Group prayer can be beneficial not only because of the connections with God but also the social support that surrounds group prayer.

Four Benefits of Prayer

According to Krause, Chatters, Meltzer, and Morgan (2000) there are four ways that group prayer may affect health. First, by making older adults more aware of the needs of others, group prayer may facilitate the help – giving process. This is important because research with older adults suggests that providing assistance to others improves the well-being of the help provider as well as the recipient (Krause, 1986). This concept goes along with the elderly finding meaning in a world where worth is derived from what an individual can produce and give to society. An elderly individual being able to help someone can give him or her that sense of meaning they are searching for.

The second way that group prayer may affect health is “being aware that one is the object of collective prayer may be a potent force for maintaining hope in the face of adversity” (Krause, 1986). As research reviewed by Nunn (1996) indicated, people who are able to continue a sense of hope in the face of hardship

tend to enjoy better health than those who lose hope during difficult times. As individuals age the issues of health become more prominent. Health issues such as heart disease, cancer, and Alzheimer's can affect the individual and the people they love. Dealing with health related issues could become overwhelming and frightening. Finding others who can pray with the family and with the individual can relieve the sense of hopelessness.

The third reason why group prayer may affect health is the positive emotions experienced by individuals who take part in prayer groups (Krause, 2000). An extensive body of literature links positive emotions with improved immune functioning (Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1995).

The fourth and last reason group prayer is positive for health is the actual physical contact associated with prayer groups. This is important because there is some evidence that the simple act of touching others carries positive health benefits (Brennen, 1987). Taken as a whole, the four strategies previously discussed give strong reasons why group prayer can be beneficial to the health of the elderly.

Social Support

Social support can come in many different forms. Family and friends are the two most important forms of support. Living in a nursing home can be isolating and lonely but having individuals who visit can brighten the atmosphere. Having the family visit or take the individual out of the home can increase

feelings of happiness. Having friends who are dependable and around can greatly enhance feelings of contentness (DuPertuis, 2001). In research it was found that individuals with a high level of perceived support from family and friends reported lower levels of depressive symptoms than did the social isolates – those who reported low levels of support from both sources. Any support, whether from family or friends, was associated with fewer symptoms (DuPertuis, 2001). In addition, it can speed recovery from illness, reduce levels of medication that are needed, and reduce psychological and cognitive impairments (Haber, 1994).

Social support has been related to better psychological adjustment in older populations. Not only does psychological adjustment improve with good social support but also helps increase self-esteem, improve health, bring about recognition of self-worth, and help find socially rewarding roles in the community (DuPertuis, 2001). Families can help the elderly in stressful situations better cope with the stressful circumstances and feel more supported.

Large social networks (friends and family) provide individuals with regular positive experiences and a set of stable, socially rewarded roles in the community, which generate positive affect, a sense of predictability and stability in one's life, and recognition of self-worth. Social support may help feelings of positive self – regard eroded by stress (Krause, 1987).

Again a concern for the elderly is concentrated around the issue of meaning and self – worth. Finding areas and activities that can help maintain

those feelings of self – worth are extremely important. As an individual ages the productivity declines but the individual is just as important and meaningful.

Finding meaning is difficult if the individual bases their worth primarily on what they do in the work force or contribute to society. The elderly are still important to those who love them. The elderly are still important to society considering they are living human beings who have extreme worth as individuals. The elderly can teach us things that no other human being would know, they have experienced things that we would never imagine, and they can tell stories that would take our breath away. The elderly have much to contribute to society.

Intergenerational interaction

There are many intergenerational programs that have already been implemented in different areas. Several programs have been created, such as the Foster Grandparent Program, the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (R.S.V.P) and National Council on Aging has put together programs linking individuals over the age of 60 with youths under the age of 25 (Aday, 1991).

Intergenerational activities can serve to: overcome the drift toward an age – graded society, relieve possible future tension between the generations, provide a historical awareness of the past, present, and future, and provide a sharing of a multicultural diversity of values and life – styles (Aday, 1991).

The elderly are part of society's past that many other individual's have no concept of. Not only do intergenerational programs benefit the young they also

benefit the elderly. It can give the elderly a sense of worth as they interact with younger generations and give them a sense of being a part of a larger society. As previously discussed, along with self-worth comes energy and good health. It has been further proposed that intergenerational programming has the potential for counteracting common stereotypes and negative evaluations children have of older people (Aday, 1991). Common stereotypes that younger generations may hold may be things such as the elderly being senile, they drool, they smell, gross and wrinkly, and they drive poorly. Interacting with the elderly can enhance younger generation's perceptions of the aging process by showing that life does not have to become negative.

Intergenerational programming uses activities that increase cooperation, interaction, and exchange among generations. Through these programs, different generations can share their skills, backgrounds, and expertise, thereby supporting each other in relationships that benefit both the individual and the community (Corbin, 1998). The community benefits from intergenerational programs because all individuals can be brought together to share in activities. People being brought together can foster better relationships between those who share together but also spread more communal thinking to others around them. A thinking that is more community based than individualistic. A thinking that is based on sharing and giving rather than taking. Society today is segregated; it is an individualistic society where people fend and live for themselves. Finding

ways to desegregate the generations but also bring more community to every individual is a step in the right direction. Intergenerational programs can help to provide various types of social support – emotional, informational, and other types of tangible support. Some HPERD (The department of health, physical, education, recreation, and dance) programs, such as dance programs, can provide social support in the form of human touch and opportunities for social interaction (Corbin, 1998). Intergenerational programs are a wonderful way of bringing together different generations but if not carefully planned it may not be beneficial to the young or the old. The programs should be carefully planned and implemented in order to ensure the best environment for every generation involved (Corbin, 1998).

Implications for Counselors

As the number of elderly individuals increases so does the need for counselors competent in working with them. By the year 2005, the projected number of Americans between the ages of 55-69 will be 39.7 million (“boomer facts”, 2000). Aging Americans currently are the fastest growing population (Dixon, 2003). With this fact in mind it is important that counselors become trained in the area of gerontology.

The elderly experience many changes as they grow older. They may experience the loss of a spouse, siblings, parents, friends, and career (Clements, 1984). With this loss is the potential for depression, anxiety, substance abuse and

other emotional issues (Kelley, 2003). It will be the responsibility of mental health counselors to face the challenge and meet the needs of these individuals. Counselors will also need to help encourage the elderly and make them comfortable in seeking help (Dixon, 2003).

Most importantly, counselors need to treat the elderly with respect. According to Clements, emphasizing their strengths, developing their independence, encouraging decision making, and treating them as an individual are the most important factors when counseling the elderly (1984). In concordance with these factors are the factors presented in this paper. Religion, social support, and intergenerational programs are factors that can be combined with the counseling process to help improve adjustment to aging.

Conclusion

In conclusion, positive aging and good psychological health can be greatly enhanced by three factors: religion, social support, and intergenerational interaction. There has already been an incredible amount of research done on religion but more can always be done. Social support is always going to be a factor that helps any individual, young or old, function more efficiently, and intergenerational programs have been studied but there is plenty more to be learned about this area.

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